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With New Survey, Chinese Colleges Ask Students What They Really Think

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Imagine a university where student numbers have doubled within five years. That is the problem facing Inner Mongolia University of Science and Technology.

Located in the bleak, industrial city of Baotou, a megacity built on mining, the campus typifies the overstretched state of China's colleges, particularly academically average ones.

The university now enrolls 19,000 undergraduates. With an average class size of 100, "students cannot get individual attention" and teacher training is a "total blank," says Zheng Wenguang, head of the higher-education department.

When Mr. Zheng began teaching there in the 1980s, new hires spent two years as assistant instructors alongside a seasoned professor. Today new faculty members "go directly into teaching because student numbers are so big." he says.

Mr. Zheng is hoping to find some solutions to that problem by having his institution participate in a new student survey, created and organized by Tsinghua University, one of the country's elite universities.

The survey, which was designed in collaboration with the influential National Survey of Student Engagement, based at Indiana University at Bloomington, asks what students think of their education and how they spend their time.

Forty-nine institutions participated this year, and confidential results of their students' responses will be given to them soon.

The results will enable administrators to pinpoint problems and identify reforms that might improve teaching styles, course materials, and students' overall enjoyment of campus life.

The administrators of NSSE China, as it is known, are also working on a national report that will be released publicly, to identify

broader trends in student engagement.

Shoddy Teaching, Bored Students

The project is being coordinated by Tsinghua University's Institute of Education, where NSSE China's team is led by Shi Jinghuan, the institute's executive vice dean.

Universities have wrestled with the twin problems of shoddy teaching and bored students for about a decade, says Ms. Shi, as the college-going rate has soared to 23 percent of 18- to 22-year-olds, up from only 6 percent in 1998. Overcrowded classrooms have contributed to the problem every bit as much as the traditions of rote learning and Confucian deference toward teachers.

NSSE China began as a pilot project among six Beijing colleges in 2007. It expanded to 27 colleges in 2009, aided by a three-year grant from the Ford Foundation to support annual surveys through 2011. One reason for its popularity is that the survey gives a "believable" description of student behavior, says Mr. Zheng, who joined the survey after hearing a presentation from Ms. Shi's team at a 2007 China Higher Education Society conference.

This year's 49 participants represent the full range of institutions, from elite universities like Tsinghua and Peking to community colleges.

China's Ministry of Education has done surveys of faculty members and administrators on its own for several years now, notes Ms. Shi, but they have focused primarily on "the standard of equipment and the basic infrastructure," things like the number and size of buildings, library space, or hours of computer training.

Those emphasized the hardware. "Now we're focusing more on the software," she says.

Luo Yan, an associate professor of education at Tsinghua who helped develop the questionnaire, explains how attempts to improve universities have evolved: "First they build good dormitories, provide good food, provide a very good library. This matches the national evaluation system, just physical things," she says. "Now they find students live in spacious rooms, [and] have many books to read, [but] they just don't."

To find out why students seem disengaged from their studies, she says, colleges are being forced to look more deeply at how they treat students. Ms. Luo calls this "client consciousness."

Reformers say this is the perfect time for such a survey to have a real impact. The education ministry just released what it calls its

2020 reform program, which outlines national education goals. Among them: more autonomy for universities from potentially meddlesome provincial officials to allow institutions to create programs tailored to the needs of their faculty members and students.

That push, combined with intense competition to attract good students, will encourage administrators and professors to improve teaching and the quality of life on campuses, Ms. Luo says.

Made in China

While the survey was designed for students in China, its roots are in the United States. Heidi Ross, director of the East Asian Studies Center at Indiana University at Bloomington, is NSSE China's co-director.

Ms. Ross, an expert on China's education system, says she was persuaded that such a survey was necessary after doing research with Peking University that showed her "how low the morale was among faculty, especially in lower-tier institutions" around China.

Ms. Ross approached NSSE to license their survey and sought a Chinese partner, settling eventually on Tsinghua.

Ms. Luo spent a year in Indiana adapting more than 100 survey questions to China's circumstances. Some changes were straightforward; questions about how students spend time together outside class were rewritten to include "karaoke" and "group meals," for example.

Other questions ask whether students help one another with their studies to get at whether they are as passive outside class as they often are inside.

Although the researchers are still sifting through the findings, the NSSE China group says a few trends have begun to emerge.

Compared with their peers in the United States, for example, Chinese students rated campus life highly when asked how well supported they feel by teachers, says Ms. Luo.

She followed up with some in-depth interviews to find out why, as many students also expressed a strong feeling of disengagement from their classes.

The positive findings reflect frequent contact with guidance teachers, who are responsible for class discipline and morale, and elected class monitors who act as student team leaders and liaise with faculty members.

At the same time, the survey results suggest that when students mention frequent contact with teachers, they're really just referring to lower-level class monitors and the like.

Making Changes

Most of the 27 universities that took part in the 2009 survey are just now coming up with recommendations based on the results. However, Tsinghua, one of the first to conduct the survey, has already begun making changes based on the findings.

For instance, a series of freshman seminars, in which well-known research professors teach undergraduates, has proven to be quite popular.

"Our survey convinced them to continue. It's very costly, so if they don't get full support they won't do it," says Ms. Shi.

Last November the university opened the Student Teaching and Learning Center to identify and aid students with academic problems, in part to help them avoid depression and other psychological problems later on.

The new center has revamped the way in which it teaches remedial mathematics after seeing the survey results. Previously it publicized math professors' office hours, with limited results.

"Sometimes we provide resources but students do not use them," says Geng Rui, deputy director of the student-affairs office. Instead, student volunteers who are good at math now offer their peers remedial coaching.

The experiment worked, illustrating one of the findings of the survey: that students like this kind of informal peer support.

Tsinghua has also established a student-support system, enlisting newly retired professors to hold regular informal chats with small groups of freshmen in their dormitories to help them adjust to college life.

"It's a big change for them, especially for students from remote areas and small villages, for them it's a big challenge," says Ms. Shi.

Also, in the industrial-engineering faculty, discussions are taking place on how to introduce more group work, says Ms. Shi.

At the less-affluent Inner Mongolia University of Science and Technology, such solutions may be harder to come by.

Mr. Zheng is blunt in saying that lack of money is one of the biggest barriers to shrinking class sizes.

Still, he has set up a committee made up largely of department heads to review the survey results. "It's not just about money, it is also about attitudes, about whether you pay attention to students' education," he says.

The fact that Tsinghua is backing the project has been a huge help in persuading senior administrators to get involved, says Ms. Ross and others. As Mr. Zheng says: "We thought their focus on teaching methods would help our college development."

Meanwhile NSSE China's Tsinghua team is busy designing even more tailored surveys. One is a small in-depth survey for the Tsinghua industrial-engineering faculty's plans for group work. Another small survey follows senior-year students into their careers. Soon, supporters hope, these surveys may result in real change.